

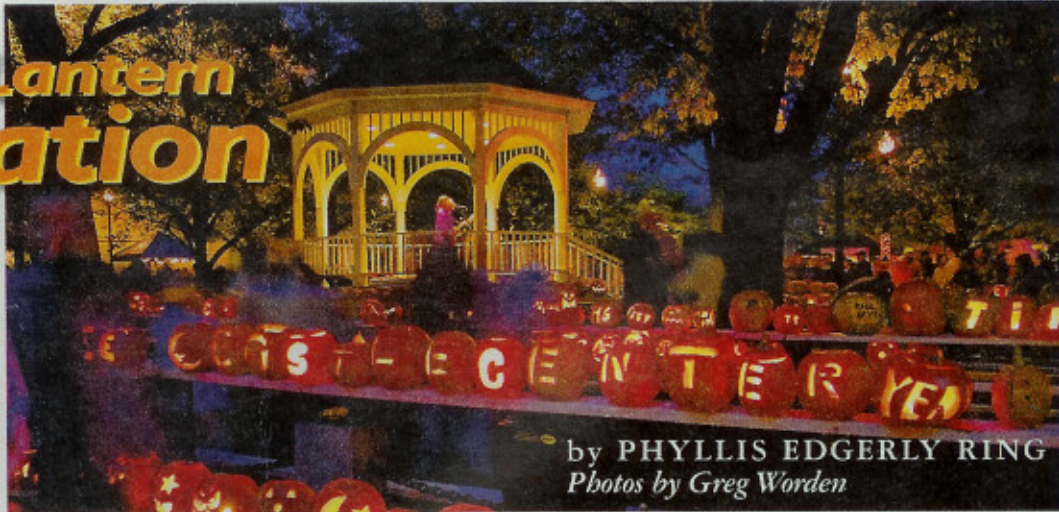
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Jack-O'-Lantern Jubilation

As dusk falls, a wondrous sight illuminates downtown Keene, N.H., as more than 22,000 glowing and grinning jack-o'-lanterns welcome 50,000 people to the annual Keene Pumpkin Festival.

The orange gourds have put the New England college town 22,563 on the map and in the *Guinness Book of Records*, says Suzanne Woodward of Center Stage Cheshire County, which organizes the festival held every third Saturday in October.

Since its beginnings in 1991 with 600 jack-o'-lanterns, the festival has set a record for the most jack-o'-lanterns—28,953 in 2003—assembled and lit in one place. The festival began as a way



by PHYLLIS EDGERLY RING
Photos by Greg Worden

The town square is decorated with some of the 22,153 jack-o'-lanterns carved for last year's Keene (N.H.) Pumpkin Festival.

to boost downtown business while providing family fun, and has grown to attract pumpkin-toting visitors from across the nation.

The thousands of pumpkins arrive with the folks who come, "including many who host neighborhood carving parties and invite family and friends each fall," says Woodward, "and local businesses whose employees help boost the count."



Suzanne Woodward

Keene's students play a big role, too. About 6,000 pumpkins grown by Newmont Farm of Bradford, Vt., are purchased by Center Stage and local business sponsors and delivered to Keene schools to be carved in classrooms and displayed in Keene's Central Square. Keene State College's student senate holds a "pumpkin lobotomy" to add another 1,500 or so to the count, says senior Adam Castor, who's been a festival volunteer since childhood.

Even Keene Mayor Mike Blastos joins in, bringing pumpkins to city council meetings for members to carve during the week leading up to the festival. "Since the whole town pulls together to make this happen, City Hall should pitch in, too," Blastos says. "I get as excited as a kid waiting to see what the count will be, and it's great to watch thousands of people having such a good time."

Festival officials keep track of the number of jack-o'-lanterns at log-in booths. The daylong event even has a carving station stocked with thousands of gourds for festival-goers to carve and contribute to the count.

Jack-o'-lanterns—from scary to silly—rise high in the festival's trademark "Pumpkin Towers," built on scaffolding up to four stories tall at several downtown locations. Center Stage board members oversee the work of four local construction companies that build the pumpkin skyscrapers, a job that begins the day before the festival and continues until the final count is tallied and verified by the mayor and an independent accounting agency. The number—22,153 in 2005—is announced just before the event's fireworks finale.

"It takes almost 100 of our nearly 900 volunteers just to keep all those jack-o'-lanterns lit," Woodward says. In recent years, due to sheer volume, the pumpkins are illuminated with electric lights rather than candles.

These displays are a one-of-a-kind sight, says Michael Estes of Elkton, Md. (pop. 11,893), attending the festival for the first time with sons Anthony, 12, Christian, 7, and Joseph, 6. "The genuinely friendly townspeople seemed to go out of their way to make us feel welcome, too," he says.

Three stages of entertainment and activities, ranging from a "pumpkin-mobile" and hayrides to seed-spitting and pie-eating contests, attract all ages. Mouth-watering smells of pumpkin pie, hot cider and pumpkin fried dough waft from dozens of booths. Pumpkin whoopee pies are usually a sell-out, and the maple-syrup cotton candy was a big hit with the Estes family. All vendor profits benefit children's charities and local service organizations.



The fall festival is a community-wide Halloween celebration that brings together student carvers and costumed kids who create and enjoy the downtown pumpkin d

"The festival celebrates families, Halloween and pumpkins, of course, but children are the honored guests," Woodward says. The day officially kicks off with a lively parade of about 1,000 costumed kids and parents.

And community service doesn't stop when the pumpkin lights are snuffed out. "By noon the next day, like Halloween elves, as many as 200 volunteers will have removed every trace," Woodward says. Most of the pumpkins wind up in the town's compost pile or are trucked to local pig farms.

"The festival really creates community," Castor says. "All ages play a part and it's a really *happy* day with everyone working together to meet a fun goal." ☆

Phyllis Edgerly Ring is a freelance writer in Exeter, N.H.

Keene's 16th annual Pumpkin Festival is scheduled Oct. 21. Visit www.pumpkinfestival.org or call (603) 358-5344 for more information.

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A four-story Pumpkin Tower illuminates downtown.

